

Saving the World Starts at Home

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Home is where one starts from.

—T.S. Eliot, “East Coker”

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I. INTRODUCTION

In *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, Peter Singer tells us that effective altruism is “a philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to working out the most effective ways to improve the world.”¹ What are these ways of improving the world? Helpfully, Singer describes several life paths or projects one might undertake as an effective altruist.² I summarize them here:

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1. PETER SINGER, *THE MOST GOOD YOU CAN DO: HOW EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM IS CHANGING IDEAS ABOUT LIVING ETHICALLY* 4–5 (2015).

2. *Id.* at 23–74.

1. **Living modestly to give more:** you may be a bus driver or pipefitter, but you can live in a small apartment, limit how much you dine out, and instead donate these funds to effective charities.
2. **Earning to give:** you take a high-paying job, say in finance, and give away most of your income to effective charities.
3. **The Advocate:** you serve the purposes of effective altruism by being in the public eye, giving talks, writing op-eds, being a social media influencer, etc.
4. **The Bureaucrat:** you work for a governmental organization (like the State Department) or a non-governmental one (like the World Bank) and use your position to try to get resources directed to those most in need in the most effective ways.
5. **The Researcher:** you devote yourself to research, say, as an economist or social scientist, to answer relevant questions about poverty and donation priorities, among other topics.
6. **Organizer or Campaigner:** you start or work for an aid or charity organization aimed at, say, alleviating extreme poverty or decreasing cases of easily preventable disease.
7. **Organ Donation:** you give a kidney.

Call this the List. I doubt that either Singer or any other effective altruist would take the List to be the final word on how to be an effective altruist. But it does represent the main menu of ways that, according to effective altruists, we can most effectively make the world a better place. If one undertakes to be an effective altruist, then one should do one or more of the things on the List, for these are the most effective ways of doing the most good in the world.³ Not everyone agrees, however, that the activities on the List are the most effective ways to do the most good.

One kind of critic says the List gets things terribly wrong. According to this critic, we should pursue more “systemic” or “institutional” changes instead of creating or donating to relief organizations. Traditional charitable action, so it is said, only entrenches the neoliberal status quo, and so fails to address the true heart of the problem of extreme poverty. Writing for *Jacobin*, for example, Mathew Snow tells us that, “Rather than creating an individualized ‘culture of giving,’ we should be challenging capitalism’s institutionalized taking.”⁴ Not only does the List therefore fail to include the most important kinds of altruistic activities, but the traditional charitable activities are ultimately counterproductive

3. I will set aside the distinct question as to whether one *should* be an effective altruist. There is now a debate among effective altruists about whether the movement should claim: (a) that most people have a moral obligation to be an effective altruist or (b) that effective altruism is a permissible and perhaps morally praiseworthy “life project,” and insofar as one chooses to adopt this life project, one should do so in the ways that effective altruists recommend.

4. See, e.g., Mathew Snow, *Against Charity*, JACOBIN (Aug. 25, 2015), <https://jacobin.com/2015/08/peter-singer-charity-effective-altruism> [<https://perma.cc/YV8P-UYFJ>].

(with exceptions, like organ donation). Perhaps it's good to be an effective altruist—understood as effectively doing the most good for the world—it's just that the activities that effective altruists typically recommend are fundamentally misguided.

Another kind of critic says that the List is fine so far as it goes but adds that it is incomplete. He thinks that other forms of charitable giving can do great good: giving to universities, art museums, zoos, or your local public school system.⁵ Some critics might add non-monetary forms of local charitable action: volunteering at your library, tutoring at the high school, mentoring a young child with Big Brothers Big Sisters, and so on.⁶ These are effective ways of doing great good, so these critics say, and they should not be neglected or downgraded in discussions of effective altruism.

This paper forwards a species of the second kind of criticism. I want to focus on an activity that is at once more pedestrian and more controversial than anything already mentioned. It's more pedestrian because it is less exciting. Practitioners of this proposed form of effective altruism will not make headlines for their extreme generosity or for radically organizing their lives around helping others. You will not be profiled by *The Atlantic*. It's also an activity that many people already do, at least to some extent. In fact, if you are reading this, you probably already do it.

Yet my proposal is also more controversial because, to my knowledge, it's rarely if ever suggested as a form of effective altruism. This is not mere oversight, as if activists did not previously know about this activity. Upon hearing about it, few effective altruists will start recommending it in TED talks. I suspect most effective altruists will even reject this proposal. It is not that effective altruists will argue that this activity is morally wrong (although I am not so sure that some will not). Rather, it's that many effective altruists will think that this activity has no business on a list of such importance.

The form of effective altruism I wish to consider is that of *creating a good home*.

I will argue that creating a good home is a legitimate form of effective altruism: it is a very effective way of doing great good in the world. As such, it belongs on the List. Effective altruists should more often encourage people to create good homes as a way of bettering the world. I will say a bit about what a good home is, what kinds of activities count as creating one, and why I think it's such an important and effective way of doing great good. I will then pause to consider an objection and, in the process, pose a challenge to the effective altruist. I

5. See, e.g., Gary P. Steuer, *Could effective altruism destroy the arts?*, WASHINGTON POST (Sep. 8, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/08/could-effective-altruism-destroy-the-arts/> [<https://perma.cc/P6V7-VYQS>].

6. See, e.g., Stephanie Wykstra, *A Case for Giving Locally*, STANFORD SOC. INNOV. REV. (Mar. 8, 2018), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/a_case_for_giving_locally [<https://perma.cc/9R55-R2Q9>].

conclude by speculating about why effective altruists have ignored the home in their discussions of effective altruism.

II. HOMES, GOOD HOMES, AND HOME LIFE⁷

A home is not simply your house, the physical structure, though it is not less than that. The home also includes the people who live there, and the personal “belongings” those people keep there. The ancient Greeks had a name for this holistic idea of the home: the *oikos*.

For most readers, your apartment, dormitory, or house will be your home. You may live with others or alone. Your home is one of the few places—maybe the only place—on the face of the earth where you enjoy immense freedom. You may create a space that suits you and where you feel comfortable. Within very wide limits, others may not tell you how to arrange your home, what you do there, and when you do it.

A *good* home provides its inhabitants with relative safety. Those who live there can reasonably expect not to be physically harmed, either by intruders or other residents. Good homes are also peaceful insofar as they are generally low-stress and not chaotic. The inevitable conflicts of home life are dealt with in productive and healthy ways. Good homes are welcoming. Private, but not fully closed off from the world, good homes are places for friendship and hospitality.⁸ We can call a *home life* one that involves devoting significant time and resources to creating and maintaining a good home.

A good home takes effort to create and maintain. At one level, everyone knows this. Homes are physical places that require maintenance and upkeep. People devote considerable time and resources to making repairs, cleaning, decorating, and adding onto their homes. Americans spend more than \$400 billion a year for home renovations and repairs.⁹ American college students spend nearly \$6 billion a year furnishing their dorms.¹⁰ The point is that everyone already thinks of their homes as something to attend to, even if all they have in mind is attention to the physical aspects of home: furniture to buy, walls to decorate, roofs to replace, mice to kill, and sinks to clean.

Good homes require more than physical attention, however, because the *oikos* is more than just a physical object. Good homes also demand personal and social attention: kindness, care, generosity, healthy communication, and loving attention.

7. Some of the material in this and the next two sections is adapted from Justin Tosi & Brandon Warmke, *Why It's OK to Mind Your Own Business* (2023).

8. Philosophers David Jenkins and Kimberly Brownlee describe the “rich notion of a home which focuses on meeting our social needs including, specifically, our needs to belong and to have meaningful control over our social environment,” which is the sense of home I have in mind here. See David Jenkins & Kimberley Brownlee, *What a Home Does*, 41 L. & PHIL. 441 (2022).

9. JOINT CTR. FOR HOUSING STUDIES OF HARVARD UNIV., REMODELING, <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/research-areas/remodeling> [<https://perma.cc/9NMF-LL59>] (last visited Dec. 19, 2022).

10. Darian Somers, *Study: Students Spent \$5.9B Furnishing College Dorms*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP. (Aug. 31, 2017), <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2017-08-31/study-students-spent-59b-furnishing-their-college-dorms> [<https://perma.cc/C9PB-5JM9>].

A kitchen renovation does not make a home safe, peaceful, or welcoming. Good homes are not made accidentally or automatically, either. Often, they are not made at all, as many can unfortunately attest. Creating a good home takes considerable time and attention. Indeed, it is easy to underestimate the time and attention that must therefore be diverted from other perfectly worthwhile projects to make a good home.

Our discussion of creating a good home or “home life” might lead some readers to think that I am talking only about stay-at-home parents or those who used to be called homemakers. Certainly, many such people will devote time and resources to home life. But there is nothing about home life as such that requires being a homemaker. College students, working singles and parents, and empty nesters can all, in their own way, create good homes. Furthermore, people from across the political spectrum can agree on the importance of good homes.

It bears emphasizing: not all homes are good homes. Many are mediocre. Some are bad. I must also emphasize that good homes do not happen automatically. They require devoting significant effort to their cultivation and maintenance. Further, as it should be obvious, there are trade-offs. Time and money spent on creating and cultivating a good home cannot also be spent on other endeavors. An hour spent reading to your kids or hosting friends is an hour not working at Starbucks so you can give that money to Oxfam. You might be skeptical that home life activities could be all that important. So, I want to bring into relief three beneficial consequences of creating good homes.

III. REFUGE

A good home—one that is safe, peaceful, and welcoming—is a refuge. Homes are refuges because they provide a retreat from the public world. At home we can escape the bad, dangerous, stressful, and unhealthy: would be attackers, inclement weather, or workplace drama. Homes also offer a break from the norms of professionalism, rules of public etiquette, and expectations of workplace productivity. Homes provide for the cultivation of important private goods. In the home you can find a positive environment of support, encouragement, freedom, and rest.

Most obviously, home is a physical refuge. It offers protection from physical threats and provides physical benefits. Some physical threats are natural—inhabitable weather and dangerous wildlife chief among them. Other physical threats are personal. Homes mitigate the risk of bodily harm, theft, and violations of privacy. Among their physical benefits, homes function as a reliable place for sustenance and rest. Put simply, it’s where you keep your food and where you sleep. These might seem like trite observations. But they would not be taken for granted by our ancestors for virtually all human history. And they are not now taken for granted by billions of people for whom reliable protection from natural and personal threats is a daily concern.

Home also provides psychological refuge from the stress-causing spheres of public life, particularly the workplace and politics. Forty percent of US workers

say that their job is “very or extremely stressful.” And a quarter report that their job is “the number one stressor in their lives.”¹¹ Many are stressed out by politics. Fifty-seven percent of Americans say that politics is a very or somewhat significant source of stress in their lives.¹² Politics has an unfortunate tendency to infiltrate private life. According to one study, twenty percent of Americans report that politics has damaged a friendship, and seventeen percent say that politics has damaged family relations or made their home life less pleasant.¹³ But if you are lucky or manage it well, home can provide at least a temporary refuge from the stresses of work and politics.

Even when a home offers an escape from the stress of work and politics, it can create stresses of its own. Some homes are chaotic and stressful in their own right. Good homes, though, are peaceful and calm. If you live alone, at minimum, you can create a place to pursue hobbies or activities that have nothing to do with work or politics: reading novels, gardening, watching TV. If you live with others, you can create a place that is supportive, encouraging, and loving, irrespective of your job performance or political inclinations.

The home also provides a place to express emotions that are out of place at work, at the coffee shop, or in class. At home you may freely embrace and display deep sadness or romantic passion. After all, not all emotional expressions should be exposed to just anyone. In fact, it is good that much of our private lives are concealed and not exposed to the public. As Thomas Nagel explains, there are two reasons for this.¹⁴ First, private spaces reduce the amount of stuff that must be taken into consideration and responded to by the public. The more stuff out there in public, the greater chance for disagreement and hostility. Concealment therefore has a public function: to buffer against social conflict. But concealment also has a private function. Vulnerability and intimacy—whether emotional or physical—require privacy. Private spaces prevent watchful eyes from distorting or destroying valuable activities that require protection from the public gaze. The home, as a stable private place, allows you to express emotions that might otherwise cause public conflicts and makes vulnerability and intimacy possible.

Finally, home offers a refuge from social life itself. In our public lives we travel through various social spheres: the sphere of work, politics, religion, and so on. Each sphere has its own distinctive social norms. The social norms at a political rally differ from those at work, and each of those has different social norms from those at church. Since we’ve already noted how the home offers refuge

11. NAT’L INST. FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY & HEALTH WORKING GRP., CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, PUB. NO. 99-101 STRESS AT WORK, (1999), <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/99-101/default.html> [<https://perma.cc/RRJ5-LE3G>].

12. AM. PSYCH. ASS’N, STRESS IN AMERICA: COPING WITH CHANGE (2017), <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2016/coping-with-change.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/U7UM-SBWD>].

13. Kevin Smith et al., *Friends, relatives, sanity, and health: The costs of politics*, 14(9) PLOS ONE e0221870 (2019).

14. Thomas Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure*, 27 PHIL. & PUB. AFFS. 3 (1998).

from work and politics, let's turn our attention to a different realm of public life: the economic sphere.

Most people reading this paper live in a modern market economy. You live in a place with strong private property rights, where labor is specialized and divided across individuals and firms, and goods and services are typically distributed by way of voluntary transactions guided by the price system. Markets are institutions with their own norms: seek profit, compete with other buyers or other sellers, and so on.

But life is not just one big market. G.A. Cohen illustrated this when he asked us to imagine going on a fun camping trip with friends.¹⁵ We bring our pots and pans, coffee, fishing rods, canoes, decks of cards. We do the activities we enjoy and chip in where we can. What we do not do, Cohen says, is assert our rights over pieces of equipment, renting them out to the highest bidder. We do not trade an hour of time sitting in our chair for a piece of fish. We do not charge our friends for the right to use our potato-peeler. *We could*. But we do not. And one reason we do not is that it's good for there to be aspects of our lives that are not governed by market norms. The home is such a place, where the norms of "doing business" can be replaced with the norms of family, friendship, and neighborliness. The home can be, to borrow a phrase from Leon Kass, "an assertion against and a recognition of the given dog-eat-dog character of the world."¹⁶

For many, the home is cruel, a source of abuse, hurt, or loneliness. Growing up in a bad home—one that is not safe, peaceful, or welcoming—is one of the greatest harms one can inflict on a child. Many adults become trapped in bad homes as caretakers or spouses. These pedestrian observations reinforce two points. First, good homes are vital to the mental and physical health of children and adults alike. And second, that good homes do not happen automatically. It takes effort and care to create a place of refuge.

IV. HOSPITALITY

The home is also where strangers become friends through the practice of hospitality. It is important to see from the outset that hospitality is not the same as charity. You can show charity to total strangers with whom you never interact. You can give money to organizations that help the poor without having a clue who you are helping. Often you do not care who exactly you are helping, as long as people are being helped. Though charitable and perhaps generous, this is not hospitality. Hospitality is not generic giving to unknown persons. We show hospitality to particular people in our lives: neighbors, families, strangers. Furthermore, unlike charity, hospitality requires an act of welcoming. Insofar as it is possible and appropriate, hospitality makes a guest feel at home.

Hospitality is not the mere hosting of guests, however. Owning a bed and breakfast is not hospitality even if, unlike the charitable donor, you exchange

15. G. A. COHEN, *WHY NOT SOCIALISM?* (2009).

16. LEON R. KASS, *THE HUNGRY SOUL: EATING AND THE PERFECTING OF OUR NATURE* 107 (1994).

emails with your guests to arrange their stay and payment. Hospitality requires a level of attentiveness to your guests, primarily through the recognition and generous meeting of their needs, which requires spending time with them. Yet hospitality goes beyond attentiveness to and meeting of a guest's needs. A hotel staff member who waits on you hand and foot may be an attentive servant, but hospitality requires more than mere serving. Rather (at least in some cultures), it requires sharing, characteristically but not necessarily, a meal, drinks, and conversation. We can say, then, that hospitality is the act of welcoming particular others, meeting their needs, and sharing experiences. More simply, hospitality is the activity of *attentive welcoming*.

As an act of welcoming, hospitality offers your guest significant freedom to be themselves. This precludes inviting them into your home to change them or correct their political views. You cannot be hospitable and a busybody or moralizer. Hospitality allows guests to let their guard down in a foreign place. And most people only feel comfortable doing this when they know they are being accepted, and not treated as someone to be harangued, changed, or judged. To be hospitable you must be prepared to bracket off many differences between you and your guest. You ignore or sublimate possible or actual disagreements about religion, politics, and moral outlook. This is why it is inappropriate to browbeat your guests with your political views, or to embarrass them by making fun of theirs over a holiday meal. Hospitality means, within very wide limits, giving people freedom to be themselves—hosts must mind their own business, setting aside their own opinions to allow someone to feel free and comfortable. Announcing or imposing your ideas and patterns of behavior on guests will suffocate them. Even worse is to ask a guest to leave because of differences of opinion. Hospitality requires acceptance, not hostility. The acceptance that hospitable hosts extend to their guests provides hospitality its transformative power. Hospitality, Henri Nouwen writes, can “convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest.”¹⁷ Hospitality can turn strangers into friends. It can make your home a refuge, not just for yourself, but for others.

Homes are the most natural place to show hospitality. Attentive welcoming requires a setting where the host has significant authority and control. You cannot welcome someone to a place you have no right to be in the first place (your boss's dining room). You may invite someone to join you in a more public space like a restaurant, bar, or coffee shop, but these places severely restrict your freedom to be generous with your guests: you cannot stay late after business hours, you cannot just grab a snack off the shelf, you cannot offer a shower and shave. It is common to tell guests to “make themselves at home,” something that only makes sense to tell someone when you can make yourself at home.

Homes are prime settings for hospitality also because, as private spaces, they offer a unique level of comfort. At home you can relax and converse without

17. HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, REACHING OUT: THE THREE MOVEMENTS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE 66 (1986).

worrying about eavesdroppers or interlopers. Guests and hosts can let their guards down, which is less likely to happen in more public spaces.

Of course, home is not the only place you can show hospitality. Anywhere you have the right to welcome others can be a place to be hospitable. Taxi drivers and store greeters can show hospitality in their own way. Teachers can extend hospitality to their students in the classroom.¹⁸ But few places match the home as the exemplary setting to welcome guests.

Hospitality forges social bonds. Plato called the connection formed between guest and host *exenothesan*, “ties of hospitality.”¹⁹ These ties are formed in several ways. In offering refuge, you provide a safe and peaceful place for people who do not otherwise have one. Hospitality also converts neighbors from strangers to friends. Many people become very close friends with their neighbors. It is easy to forget that every neighbor was once a total stranger. By opening your home to your neighbors through hospitality, you create local bonds of trust, support, and enjoyment.

Hospitality also has the capacity to build bridges. Chances are, you have co-workers and neighbors with whom you disagree sharply about religion, politics, and morality. In many contexts of life, these differences bubble up into conflict and hostility. But the norms of hospitality forbid conflict over such matters. Hospitality therefore offers an explicitly pro-social context where strangers can become friends and enjoy each other’s company, irrespective of their politics. In a culture where everything from pop music to professional sports to young adult fiction has been thoroughly politicized, contexts where people can be friends and share activities with others from across political divides should be preserved and prized. Hospitality is one of the more promising ways to lower the political temperature and build social trust.

V. FAMILY

A family is a multi-generational group of people who live together, where the adults take responsibility for raising the dependent children.²⁰ Not every home contains a family, but every family needs a home. More specifically, families need good homes: places that are safe, peaceful, and welcoming. This may seem like a painfully banal point, and in a way it is. It might not be worth making such an observation were it not for the fact that so many homes are bad. They are dangerous, chaotic, stressful, unwelcoming, disruptive, or abusive. In bad homes, parents belittle their children, who in turn dishonor their parents.

Of course, few parents deliberately set out to create a bad home. And the reasons there are so many bad homes are complex and various. Luckily, we need not

18. *Id.* at 79–100. See also John B. Bennett, *The Academy and Hospitality*, 50 *CROSSCURRENTS* 23 (2000); JOHN B. BENNETT, *ACADEMIC LIFE: HOSPITALITY, ETHICS, AND SPIRITUALITY* (2008).

19. See Plato, *Laws*, in *THE DIALOGUES OF PLATO* 624e (Benjamin Jowett trans., 1892).

20. This is basically Archard’s definition. See DAVID ARCHARD, *THE FAMILY: A LIBERAL DEFENCE* 20 (2010).

investigate those here, for my point is a simple one: families need good homes, and good homes do not happen automatically. If you have or want a family, there is little more important you can do with your life than to provide them with a good home.

For many, creating a good home for a family means establishing and nurturing a stable and mutually honoring and loyal marriage into which one can welcome children in the first place. It is easy to forget that when one has children one is inviting a stranger into one's home.²¹ Having children can therefore itself be a form of hospitality. And just as hospitality to a stranger in the form of a neighbor requires inviting him into a safe, peaceful, supportive home, so does hospitality to a stranger in the form of a child.

A good home also lays the foundation for a physically and psychologically healthy child. Psychologist Abraham Maslow explains:

the average child, and less obviously, the average adult in our society generally prefers a safe, orderly, predictable, lawful, organized world, which he can count on and in which unexpected, unmanageable, chaotic, or other dangerous things do not happen, and in which, in any case, he has powerful parents or protectors to shield him from harm.²²

A good home is also where older generations pass on their traditions to the next, including a language, manners, a basic moral code, and a religious faith. Parents also pass onto their children an awareness and appreciation of what they love: music, art, literature, extended family, a sports team. Of course, children will often grow and replace many of their parents' loves with their own. As it should be. But a total rejection of what one's parents love is rare, and many adults will eventually learn to appreciate such things. At any rate, a parent would act profoundly selfishly to refuse to pass onto his children any tradition or any appreciation for what he loves.

VI. HOME LIFE AND EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM

This discussion of the benefits of a good home has been admittedly impressionistic. Minimally, I hope it communicates that creating a good home is a very valuable thing to do for the world. Or, if already convinced of that, you'll perhaps have a better view of why that is so.

I began by suggesting that creating a good home has a claim to being on the List, that set of activities that effective altruists like Peter Singer recommend to those who want to do great good for the world. It's hard to know exactly how to judge whether a particular activity is one of the "most" effective ways of improving the world. Are we concerned with the ten most effective? The top 20? Does morality require that we spend time only doing the singularly most effective form

21. See NOUWEN, *supra* note 17, at 81–84.

22. ABRAHAM H. MASLOW, *MOTIVATION AND PERSONALITY* 41 (1970).

of giving? I'll leave these questions for others. Hopefully we can agree that if we came across a way of effectively improving the world in substantial ways, that would be very good news indeed. I claim that creating a good home greatly improves the world, and it does this relatively effectively. One way to see this clearly is just to ask yourself: What if people stopped spending time on home life? It would be very bad for the world, and bad in ways that are hard to imagine.

Home life's effective altruist credentials are bolstered by comparing it to more traditionally recommended activities, like sacrificing creaturely comforts to give away large portions of your income to charity or getting a high paying job so you can give away most of your income. Consider some criticisms of these latter activities:

- Demandingness: In most cases, telling people to give significant time and resources to charities exceeds their genuine moral duties.
- Motivational obstacles: It is psychologically difficult for people to motivate themselves to give significant time and resources to charities.
- Epistemic limits: In a complex world, there are limits to what we can know about how our large-scale charitable efforts will turn out.²³
- Ineffectiveness: Ordinary peoples' donations to charities will often do little good or even be harmful on balance.²⁴
- Grift: Highly visible, large-scale charitable entities attract bad actors who use effective altruism as moral cover to launder reputation, power, and wealth.²⁵

Among effective altruists, these are well-known criticisms, and I will not go into more detail. Some critics have argued that these problems are sufficient to show that traditional effective altruist recommendations are misguided and that people who want to lift the world's poor out of poverty should focus their efforts elsewhere.²⁶ That's not my present point, and I do not claim that people should not engage in these traditional activities. Rather, my point is that home life fares well against these objections. Creating a good home life is not likely to be charged with being too morally demanding because it is not. This is not to say home life is easy. But it is hard to see why encouraging someone to create a good home would be an unreasonable demand, at least for most people. As for

23. See GERALD F. GAUS, *THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS COMPLEXITIES* (2021).

24. See Mark Budolfson & Dean Spears, *The Hidden Zero Problem: Effective Altruism and Barriers to Marginal Impact*, in *EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM: PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES* 184 (2019). Bob Fischer tells me, however, that the concerns raised in this paper are not as pressing as they once were.

25. See Sophie Alexander, *Sam Bankman-Fried's 'Effective Altruism' Implodes With His FTX Fortunes*, *BLOOMBERG* (Nov. 11, 2022), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-11/bankman-fried-s-effective-altruism-implodes-with-his-fortunes> [<https://perma.cc/AG4R-MVNZ>].

26. See, e.g., Peter Singer, *The Logic of Effective Altruism*, *BOSTON REV.* (Jul. 1, 2015), <http://bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism> [<https://perma.cc/937B-CVJM>].

motivational obstacles, some people surely struggle motivating themselves to keep a clean, safe, and welcoming home. But compared to more traditional effective altruist activities, many people find it easier to create a good home. There are fewer epistemic limits to doing good at home, too. You can be confident that inviting neighbors over for dinner or reading to your kids will have a high return on investment, and that these things are unlikely to backfire or have unforeseeable negative consequences. And they certainly will not backfire on a massive scale. Home life is also likely to be effective. Compare: (1) working an extra hour at Starbucks to donate that \$10 to Oxfam; and (2) using that hour to read another story to your kids. To the extent that you can even make an intelligent comparison, you are much more likely to make a difference doing the latter. And gifters are not running home to get rich or inviting friends over for dinner or making healthy meals for their children.

Even if this is correct, what follows from it? The idea is that home life does not suffer from any (or many) of the standard objections to effective altruism. It's true that by devoting significant time to home life, you will not thereby build a well in Eritrea or send a mosquito net to Bangladesh. But if you do not create a good home, it is certain that no one else will do it for you; whereas if you do not send \$10 to buy a mosquito net, it's not unlikely that a billionaire will do it instead. To be clear, I'm not saying that you should not give to charity. What I am saying is that people who devote significant time and resources to home life are doing a great good for the world, and may, on balance, do more good for the world than many ordinary people plying their hands at effective altruism.

Why should we care whether creating a good home counts as effective altruism? So what? For one, if the thesis is right, then more people are effective altruists than many think. That's good news. Second, it will also be good news to effective altruists to learn that there are more ways to be an effective altruist than previously thought. Effective altruists should welcome the opportunity to provide ordinary people with an additional way of greatly improving the world. Third, many people have created bad homes instead of good ones. Assuming effective altruists think this is very bad, they should devote attention to encouraging people to create good homes instead. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, if home life can be effective altruism, then some forms of effective altruism are more fundamental than others: moral education, basic life skills, and mental health, for example, are more likely to be imparted by good homes than bad homes. Are we to believe that effective altruists think that if we had more bad homes, this would not affect how much people care about the global poor or give to charities? Surely not. The charitable society envisioned by effective altruists depends on children having a good upbringing, and a whole host of other, less visible forms of activity that make a society in which generosity is at all possible. Effective altruists portray home life as a set of obligations one must discharge *before* getting to the real work of doing the most good. Or to put it differently, effective altruists take good homes for granted, and it is only after that point that effective altruism starts.

There's another way of thinking about matters: home life is a form of effective altruism that helps create a society in which standard forms of charitable action are possible at all. Effective altruists should agree that homes are important places to improve the world. And they should not simply assume that they get good homes for free. People must sacrifice significant time and resources to create them.

VII. OBJECTIONS

You might think this is simply not good enough. Even if home life is an effective way of improving the world and significantly benefiting others, it is neither sufficiently beneficial nor effective. After all, people around the world are dying due to malnutrition, unclean water, and preventable diseases. Why on earth are we talking about reading to one's children or showing hospitality when there are emergencies all over the world to address (many of them happening at the very moment you are taking time out of your day to read this sentence)?

Pardon the long quotation, but let's look at what Singer himself says about home life.

Effective altruists can accept that one's own children are a special responsibility, ahead of the children of strangers. There are various possible grounds for this. Most parents love their children, and it would be unrealistic to require parents to be impartial between their own children and other children. Nor would we want to discourage such bias because children thrive in close, loving families, and it is not possible to love people without having greater concern for their well-being than one has for others. In any case, while doing the most good is an important part of life of every effective altruist, effective altruists are real people, not saints, and they don't seek to maximize the good they do in every single thing they do, 24/7. As we shall see, typical effective altruists leave themselves time and resources to relax and do what they want. For most of us, being close to our children and other family members or friends is central to how we want to spend our time. Nevertheless, effective altruists recognize that there are limits to how much they should do for their children, given the greater needs of others. Effective altruists do not think their children need all the latest toys or lavish birthday parties, and they reject the widespread assumption that parents should, on their death, leave virtually everything they own to their children rather than give a substantial part of their wealth to those who can benefit much more from it.²⁷

I assume that this passage accurately conveys Singer's views, or at minimum, represents the views of a prominent and philosophically serious form of effective altruism. (I have recently been told that Singer perhaps does not believe what he's saying in this passage, but writes like this so that, for utilitarian reasons,

27. See SINGER, *supra* note 1, at 8.

readers will be more amenable to the less demanding versions of effective altruism.) In this passage Singer says:

1. Effective altruists may be partial to their own families and friends and may have greater concern for people close to them than they do for others far away. This means, among other things, that there will be occasions on which it is morally okay or at least not blameworthy to act for your family instead of for the world's poor.
2. Effective altruists, acting as effective altruists, do not always try to maximize the good they do.
3. Even so, effective altruists recognize limits on how much they should do for their children, given others' needs.

If Singer is correct, then being an effective altruist is consistent with what I have called home life—devoting considerable time and resources to creating a good home, with some reasonable limits. Now, Singer is not thinking of home life itself as a form of effective altruism. Rather, he seems to be thinking of it as a kind of morally permitted break we get before we get back out there and do the real work of effective altruism. I have argued that we can and should think of home life as effective altruism in and of itself. Regardless, Singer should have no problem with encouraging people to create good homes. Here, then, I ask: what is the objection to thinking of it as a form of effective altruism? Please keep points 1–3 in mind and be specific.

One complaint might be that many people are *already* creating a good home, and effective altruism is focused on encouraging people to make the world a *better* place. But many people fail to create good homes and create bad ones instead, with devastating consequences. The world would be greatly improved if even a small fraction of those people created marginally better homes. Furthermore, just because something is already being done, that does not mean it's not effective altruism. If large numbers of people were regularly giving much of their income to charity and donating their kidneys, these activities would not thereby cease being acts of effective altruism. So, home life cannot be excluded from the List simply because many people already do it.

Perhaps some effective altruists are willing to admit that creating a good home is a legitimate form of effective altruism, but they are just unwilling to put it on the List. They do not want people to think you can become an effective altruist merely by creating a good home. They worry that if Peter Singer were on stage telling people they can be effective altruists by devoting themselves to home life, then people who already do that would think they've done enough and will not do the other things on the List.

This objection raises a dilemma for the effective altruist: does the effective altruist recommend that people engage in activities that *effectively* do great good for the world, or do they instead recommend that people engage in activities that *maximize* the good they do for the world. If the former, assuming home life is an

effective way of great good for the world, then effective altruists should have no complaint about recommending it as one potential expression of effective altruism. If the latter, then the effective altruist commits to a very demanding view, one they should state and defend. The price of excluding home life from the List is honesty about what activities people are morally required to do and why.

VIII. WHY DO EFFECTIVE ALTRUISTS IGNORE HOME LIFE?

If home life is such an effective form of doing great good, is it not odd that it would be ignored? Why have effective altruists not thought of this and argued for it? You might think it is evidence against my thesis that many smart people devoted to doing great good in the world have not thought to recommend it. What gives?

One kind of *philosophical* answer says that effective altruists ignore home life because it's not an effective form of altruism in the first place. It is either not the right sort of altruism (it does not do enough good), or, even if it is the right sort, it's not sufficiently effective. I have tried to show that according to at least one form of popular effective altruism, this answer won't do. Effective altruists, it seems to me, are not entitled to complain that home life is neither altruistic nor effective. Adherents to a very demanding form of effective altruism may be entitled to this complaint, but even then, it's not clear. As a movement, effective altruism prizes empirically informed investigation into how people can do good. But effective altruists seem uncurious about home life and its importance. They have extremely complex mathematical formulas for figuring out which charity creates the maximum impact with a single dollar, but they display no apparent interest in applying similar empirical seriousness to figuring out how much good is creating by raising kids in a safe home, or reading to them, or helping them with their homework. One explanation might just be that these benefits are much more difficult to study empirically, let alone to compare to traditional forms of charity. Is it better, from the effective altruist's perspective, to work that extra hour at Starbucks and donate \$10 to Oxfam than to have neighbors over for dinner, or to help your son with his math homework? How could effective altruists know this?

Consider, then, three other explanations for why effective altruists have ignored home life: one social, one economic, and another political.

The social explanation concerns status. The suggested forms of effective altruism we canvassed at the beginning of this paper are activities that, if made public, would likely confer considerable positive social status to their practitioners. The kinds of status I have in mind include, but are not limited to, being thought of as highly moral (generous, selfless, and compassionate), being deferred to in relevant moral, political, and epistemic matters, and being given social and financial opportunities (such as being profiled in the newspaper or being paid to give talks).

Some forms of effective altruism are more likely to garner status than others. For example, consider: becoming a big-time social media influencer; having a position at the World Bank whereby one works to alleviate extreme poverty;

doing research (giving talks, writing papers, doing interviews with journalists); and being an activist with a charitable non-profit. It is virtually impossible to do these jobs without gaining social status. Many such people get lots of status. Even the other, less obvious public forms of traditional effective altruism confer status when others find out. And self-described effective altruists often do let others know about it. (I know of a philosopher who each year posts on social media how much he's donated to whom, and it's a considerable sum.) Note that I am *not* saying that all or even most people who choose these forms of altruistic life do so primarily, or even in part, consciously or not, to gain social status. Rather, it just seems to me that most of the activities on Singer's list will typically be good ways to get status.

Home life, however, is less conducive to status attainment. As sociologist Edward Shils observed, "founders are praised; innovators are praised, but not those who have maintained what the innovators created."²⁸ There is nothing wrong with founding a charity or innovating a new way to send mosquito nets. But society also needs maintainers. Devotion to home life is one form of social maintenance. And that sort of maintenance is not going to earn you much praise. Even if you talk about it publicly or share on social media, few will be impressed. "Oh, you read to your kids?" One proposal for why home life does not excite effective altruists, then, is that unlike traditional effective activism, home life is not likely to impress people. Given that people are generally drawn to status-seeking, it's not surprising that activities more likely to confer status will be popularly discussed and sought out for their social benefits. And effective altruists themselves have incentive to promote activities that are likely to give people status for doing them. Would you rather make sacrifices to help people in need or make those same sacrifices *and* get some social status in return? It's great marketing to sell altruistic activities that look good and impress others if you want people to start doing them. But we also run the risk of ignoring very effective but less status-securing activities.

The economic explanation concerns how people imagine it's possible to do great good in the world effectively. There is a way of thinking about solving long-lasting, complex global problems that prioritizes solutions that might be described as "calculating," "top-down," or "direct action." If people live in extreme poverty in Eritrea, the most obvious solution is to give them money. If people are dying of easily preventable diseases in Bangladesh, the most obvious solution is to deliver salt packets or send nurses. If public defecation is a problem in India, you deliver latrines and teach people how to use them.

Now *if* this way of thinking became dominant among effective altruists, then it would not be surprising that different approaches to doing great good would be ignored. I'm not saying these other "indirect" forms of benevolence should be preferred over the more direct ones. Rather, the point is that if the leaders of

28. EDWARD SHILS, TRADITION 2 (1983).

effective altruism came to think this way, then we should expect other strategies not to be emphasized. Given that the leaders of the effective altruist movement tend to be highly rational types—philosophers and economists—calculating forms of effective altruism are likely to be given pride of place. The calculating method identifies specific moral principles and deduces from them our moral obligations, using the tools of philosophy and economics to determine how much to give to whom, to do the most good. But some activities that benefit the world are not easily subjected to calculation. Their benefits are harder to notice and arise from traditional practices that sustain civilized society. Home life is one such activity.

The political explanation concerns how certain activities are typically coded along partisan lines. At least in the United States, hunting, fishing, and American football, for example, are usually coded as right-wing; listening to public radio, vegan cooking, and studying for a Ph.D. in the humanities are generally seen as left-wing. For what are surely complex and path-dependent reasons, effective altruism is typically promulgated by academics generally on the political left, and most vocal proponents seem to be left-leaning as well. Home life, however, is typically coded as conservative. Conservatives are more likely to prioritize domestic life, child-bearing, child-rearing, smaller-scale preservation and maintenance of institutions, and they tend to be more skeptical of the feasibility of top-down external efforts to solve massive problems. If this is correct, another potential explanation for why effective altruists ignore home life is that, due to their own political inclinations, high-profile effective altruists in a position to recommend altruistic activities do not view home life as an option due to its conservative connotations, or, if they do think of home life as an option, they do not give it much weight because of its conservative connotations. But this is unfortunate, because regardless of your politics, home is where everyone starts from.